

THE FIRST RULE OF GARDENING

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Ray lost the sight in his left eye a year before he lost the sight in his right. Now he navigates our mazy community garden with a cane and remarkably well, given how narrow, crooked, and less-than-level the paths are, covered in wood chips, edged haphazardly with rusted spikes of rebar. It's enough to trip and injure the most careful among us. But every Saturday, there Ray goes, slowly but with no misstep, past Tom's irises and Rose's tatsoi and Leslie's grid of strawberries and the other Tom's small stand of corn, until he arrives at his own plot, which is many raised beds wide. It is larger than any other in the garden, larger than the program technically allows one person to occupy.

Ray is a special case. He's our garden's godfather, one of the few surviving founders who broke ground in the 1970s. A weather-worn Italian flag hangs above his domain. Though he can't see the flag anymore, I like to think he hears it flapping in the winds that funnel through the long corridor where the community garden sits, and knows he can stop walking.

"I knew another gardener who went blind," Ray tells me one Saturday during the weekly potluck lunch. "He kept gardening for years after that. He knew what the plants needed just by touching them."

Ray's voice is hopeful, but I'm not sure how many seasons he will be here after this one. He's in his mid-eighties, relies on a pacemaker to stay out of atrial fibrillation, and has grown lean around the persistent potbelly that peeks out beneath his favorite T-shirt, which is ancient and brown and reads, "Life's a garden. Dig it."

When I first joined this site eight years ago, I watched Ray and the other old-timers closely to learn how to care for plants in the Pacific Northwest, a place I've lived for a long time but am not from. Now I watch them to learn how to put the garden to bed, a euphemism for removing spent crops and preparing the ground to rest at the end of the season. I'm also watching the garden elders to learn how to wind down a life here.

From my four deceased grandparents, I learned how to wind down a life in southeast Tennessee, where I am from. It goes something like this: You die in the winter because there's too much work to do in the summer. You die in the house where you raised your family, on your couch, in your bathroom, or on a rented hospital bed the hospice nurses set up in front of the gas heater. In the days leading up to your death, your children—all five of them, or seven—move

quietly and with astounding grief in and out of your house, and so do their spouses, your many grandchildren, and a few great-grandchildren. And your church family too. If you have living siblings, they will come to say goodbye without saying goodbye. When your sister leaves, she will squeeze your blanketed foot and say, “You be good.”

Even if you lose your memory, you’ll retain some foundational skills, like how to bathe an infant in the sink or how to play shape notes out of the red-backed hymnal. If you don’t lose your memory, you will tell stories about your own mother, gone many years now, how she wore her hair pulled back and loved to sing in the fields while she picked cotton.

If you are sick for a long time, you will rally for one glorious afternoon in your final week and astonish everyone by making a peach cobbler. If you are not sick, you will plow up the back field and put in a garden every summer, even your last. When you die, your standing freezer will be full of blueberries and corn.

Your funeral will be at the church where you were a member for as long as anybody living can recall. The same people you stood in the pews with for years singing about how beautiful heaven must be will stand in the pews and sing about how beautiful heaven must be. *Sweet home of the happy and free.*

You will be buried in the same cemetery as your parents or your spouse’s parents. Nearby will stand wide-canopied trees and a church with a white steeple. Many other tombstones will bear the same surname as yours. On holidays, your birthday, and the anniversary of your death, your children will leave silk flowers on your grave. They will sweep away any leaves that have accumulated. If the grass has grown too high, they will be unhappy and call the caretaker to complain.

Ray was the first person I met in the garden. It was February, months before most others would start cleaning up for spring, but my plot had just been assigned, and I couldn’t wait to see it. Once I located the right area, just ten-by-ten feet, it was hard not to be discouraged. In the cold drizzle I noted the disintegrating two-by-fours that marked the plot’s boundary. An overgrown sage bush took up a full third of the growing area, and the rest was covered by a thick mat of quackgrass.

“That’s invasive, you know,” Ray said, gesturing to the grass that he could see just fine back then.

I startled. He had snuck up on me. “I don’t know,” I told him. “I haven’t done this before.”

Ray bent down to show me how to dig up the weeds, how they spread beneath the ground via a network of long white roots that would need to be painstakingly removed. He was wiry, with gray hair that likely used to be black, and skin that stayed tan even in winter. He wasn’t wearing a coat but didn’t seem bothered by the weather. “Want to see my worms?” he asked, rising. I said yes, though I wasn’t sure. In the continuing rain, Ray led me to his section, then stopped beside a